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## Harun, Maureen Theresa Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Kuria Van Wieren

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Oral History Interview with  
Sister Maureen Theresa Harun

Conducted December 12, 1996  
by Kuria Van Wieren

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
Interview with Sister Maureen Theresa Harun  
December 12, 1996  
Interviewer: Kuria Van Wieren

KVW: Can you state when you were born and where?

SMTH: I was born in a town called Shennadoah, Pennsylvania (and I'm not going to give you my year) February 20th.

KVW: Great. You have, how many people are in your family?

SMTH: There are seven of us, I'm the youngest, and there are two deceased and my parents are deceased. I gave you all their names and their birthdays. My oldest brother sang in the opera in New Orleans for eighteen years. I attribute my love for music from him.

KVW: How long did you live in Shennadoah?

SMTH: Until I was eighteen, and then we moved to Philadelphia, in a suburb of Philadelphia. I lived there for a year before I entered the convent.

KVW: Was that in Pennsylvania?

SMTH: That's right. I entered the convent in Westchester, Pennsylvania. I went through training for three years and college and all that. Then I began to teach. I was in the teaching ministry for a good many years. I taught every grade from second to college level. I taught Spanish for twelve years, all levels. That was very helpful, because I went to Peru. Three different times I went to Peru, so I was there in different periods of the history of Peru, which was very interesting. That was my teaching ministry.

KVW: When did you move to Holland?

SMTH: Just this August. August of this year. I came in the middle of August and started working the last week in August here at St. Francis.

KVW: How did you happen to come to Holland?

SMTH: Well, last year I saw an ad. I was looking for a position, because I had worked for seven years in a place in Brooklyn, New York in a church. I did spiritual ministry, I was the director of a spirituality center. I did various things there in the church, mainly run that center. Also, while I was living in the New York area, I was an immigration counselor for four years. I was representing illegal aliens in the immigration courts. I was a paralegal. I traveled on the subways of New York. Then I left that ministry with the hopes of going to Poland to teach for a year. When I went for my orientation, the sister in charge of the orientation said, "Since we're never in that part of Poland we're only going to do it for the summer." In the meantime, I had left my job, and I was jobless. I went to Poland for the summer, for five weeks, and I taught, which was a wonderful experience. I came back, and because it was late in the summer all, the jobs were taken. You'd begin to look for a position in about January, start sending your resumes out January, February, March and then in the spring you wait for your answers. What I did was, I volunteered to work in our Archives, and I enjoyed that for a year. It was just like a temporary thing, because I knew that I was going to look for work that was church oriented. I saw this add in a newspaper, it's called the NCR. It

was a position to work in a church here in Holland. So, I called Father Steve Dudek, whose is in charge here, and I talked to him on the phone. He said he would get back to me for an interview. He did. I came out here in the last week of April for an interview, and I was here like the first of May and everything was getting ready for the Tulip Festival. But it was quite cool, it was very cool when I came, because I remember I came not dressed properly. I thought it was going to be hot and warm, and I didn't have warm clothing, and I borrowed a coat from someone when I came here. Then about May 4th I got a phone call. No, I didn't get a phone call. I got tulips, and it said, "Welcome to Holland." That's how I knew I got the job.

KVW: Who was the man who interviewed you?

SMTH: Father Steve Dudek.

KVW: Is he still here?

SMTH: Yes, he's in charge here. This was all this year.

KVW: When you first came to Holland, how was it different from the place you came from in Pennsylvania? Or, what were your first impressions of it?

SMTH: Well, my first impressions of it was it's a small town, and it's very picturesque, even when people would say that there are some parts that are not so beautiful as other parts. I find it, you know, all of it is very lovely. Traveling in New York, you make comparisons, or even in the nicest little towns there are sections of it that are very rundown and all that. I was impressed by it's beauty and the way it's kept-up. One of the things, though,

when I arrived here, I was very nervous about the driving, because the roads were all torn up and they still are. I'm still trying to find my way. They cut up one street on the other side of town. I find that difficult. But, I find it a very lovely town, and I like the people. I do a lot of work in the hospital. I visit sick people there, and I find all very welcoming and a wonderful staff there. I like the smallness of the town. I was born in a small town. Then, for many years, I was, well I can say all over the world, because I was in South America and Europe. At this time in my life, I'm very happy to be in a smaller town.

KVW: You say you were in Europe, did you visit the Netherlands at all?

SMTH: I did stop on my way to Poland. I went on the Dutch airlines and so we stopped.

KVW: What drew you to the church in Holland? Was there anywhere else you were looking?

SMTH: No, I just applied for the church job.

KVW: Does any of your immediate family live here in Holland?

SMTH: No. My family is all spread around the United States in different parts. The eastern part and the south -- New Orleans.

KVW: Have they visited here?

SMTH: Well, I just got here. Maybe next summer.

KVW: Where do you live in Holland?

SMTH: North side. You know as River Ave. turns into Butternut? Well, as soon as it

turns into Butternut, there's a gas station there and it's, I forget the name of it. You put your signal on and on the left hand side is Hays where I live. It takes me about five minutes to get to work every day. It's very close.

KVW: What are some qualities that seem to stand out concerning the city of Holland?

SMTH: Well, as I said, I think it's a very picturesque town. It's a town that's well kept. People are kind of reserved, and yet on the other hand I find being new, people are helpful, polite, that stands out. Because you see my last seven years I spent in New York, so when I compare, it's a wonderful... the comparison, the politeness. When you go into a store, what a difference.

KVW: You said you are involved in some organizations. What are those organizations? What do they mean in your life?

SMTH: Well, they were organizations like, I belong to the Association for Principals of Elementary and High School. I belong to an Association of Spanish Teachers. I also belong to a people that were counseling immigrants. I belong to a group that we tried to work for peace and justice.

KVW: It seems that you have a lot of involvement with Spanish speaking people. How has that helped you being in Holland?

SMTH: The language is one thing. But, I'm just finding my way around, even in my work. But for example, since I came back from Peru, all my summers I have volunteered to help underprivileged people. Like one year, I volunteered as a volunteer for the Sister's of Loretto in Sante Fe, they had an ad in the newspaper for somebody to work with Spanish kids in St. Elizabeth's shelter,

and I worked there for one summer. Then I volunteered another summer to work as a coordinator for Mexican immigrants, to work with them in Project Arise in Pharr, Texas. Mainly I helped them with their immigration papers. It was right on the border of Matamoros in Mexico. I visited there. One summer I volunteered for the Spanish Catholic Center in Silver Spring, Maryland as an immigration counselor with the Salvadorians. They had to get their papers renewed and the lines would be so long, our government would charge them money just to have their stay renewed, anything to upset them and make money, which made me sad. One summer I was a migrant counselor in Goldsborough, North Carolina. I worked with the migrant workers. Then, I went to Poland to teach English to a group of teachers. Then the last summer from about April to August I took a sabbatical in Europe. That's my summers. I always try to give back what I have been given, like my language. I also speak Polish. I speak Italian.

KVW: Have you used your Spanish a lot in Holland?

SMTH: There are people, but I'm just getting to know them. It's just, all of this I'm discovering, like if this was about a year from now, then I could tell you. But I'm using my language, of course, because our parish here, our church, is multi-cultural. It not only has Spanish, it has people from other countries. A lot of people come here, as you know, probably, they come for a while and then they either vacation here and then they go back to Florida, or they're migrant people. Not migrant in the respect that we think of migrants, but



people that are here for a time and then go to a hot climate for the winter, to get out of this snow.

KVW: How has your role in this church been different from your other jobs?

SMTH: I could say something about that. I've done different things in my other jobs. I'm really doing new things that I have not done. I'm learning them. I've never been a minister to the homebound and the sick and visiting hospitals. I never did that before. I shouldn't say I never did it before. I did visit people in their homes that were ill. But it's different. I'm more responsible for a lot of people. I work with engaged couples that are preparing to get married, and I never did that before. I'm learning that ministry. Then I volunteered to be in charge of welcoming people. I'm going to learn to welcome the people that come into our church. I find that the church here is different from the church in the east. It's a whole different kind of church. I feel it's more open to women.

KVW: Since you've been here have you seen any major problems facing general citizens of Holland? Have you seen any...?

SMTH: Well, I think just like every other town, as I probably would stay here longer, that there are problems with homelessness, because we had that big rally here in the park. There are homeless in Holland despite that the town looks so picturesque and lovely, there are the poor always with us. What is the place that they build the houses?

KVW: Habitat.

SMTH: Habitat. That is a need and people are responding to that, which is wonderful, because that provides housing for the poor, people that want to better themselves. I see the need for houses, for lower-income houses. Evergreen Commons is a great place for the senior citizens, I see there's a little problem there. The Spanish people do not feel welcome there. When they have their gatherings, they usually rent some hall where they'll feel welcome, because they don't feel welcome there. As I said, if I were here longer I would discover other problems. I think there's a problem, who ever planned this town, I still can't get over it, that there's only one way to get to the main street of Holland. I think that deters a lot of the people wanting to come to the center of the town. They go to the malls in preference to coming here, because it's so out of the way. You know what I mean? It's like an aside, it's like a Greek watching a Greek drama, and you have your little aside to distract you from... Because on my way home if I make a mistake, and will go down to the center of the town besides River Ave. I am so awe stricken by these lovely stores, but I've never the opportunity to stop there.

KVW: You talked about the homeless rally in the park. Can you tell me more about that?

SMTH: Well, it just made me aware that there are homeless here and that people care and they want to do something about it. That surprised me when I heard that there was going to be a rally here, because I just didn't think that there were homeless in Holland. Another thing surprised me is, and with a happy

surprise, is that at the Mission when we called there a couple days before Thanksgiving, they were all filled there with people that volunteered to help which is great. In most places, they get people, but it's like the last minute people that volunteer to come and help.

KVW: How do you see the Catholic church in Holland versus the other denominations in the community?

SMTH: Could you clarify for me?

KVW: I guess, how do the churches in Holland, like have you seen them come together? Or I guess how does the religious aspects of Holland like how do they communicate just the different churches. Like the Catholic church and the different Protestant churches.

SMTH: What do you mean, how they communicate? Do you mean how they relate to one another? I was never here, I came in August. What I experienced is wonderful, wonderful outreach of the Protestant churches like Third Reformed, Hope, Diminent chapel, the people that head the college, how they have opened their doors to us after the fire. There is a spirit of humanism in Holland now, at the present time that I'm here I see is it growing and growing. I am a chaplin at the hospital. There are only about two or three of us from the Catholic church, mainly they are from different denominations. There is a very nice spirit, and everybody welcomes each person. It's not what church you belong to, because as some minister said, I believe it was the Lutheran minister who said to me, "All the spires of all the churches point

upward, and we all work together for the same cause." It's true. There's a wonderful spirit in the hospital. The chaplain there is very welcoming to everybody.

KVW: Who do you work with in the hospital?

SMTH: He's the pastoral minister, and his name is David Blouw. He's a very fine person

KVW: And he is. . .

SMTH: The chaplain, he's in charge of the pastoral ministry.

KVW: How many of you are there?

SMTH: Oh, I couldn't tell you. There's so many. We all visit our own people. Then we have monthly meetings. In fact this week I'm going to an orientation at the hospital, and it's from 8:30 in the morning until some time in the afternoon. There are women ministers, Mary Van Andel, she's very welcoming. All of them, I don't know them all by name so I don't want to miss anybody, because they are all very welcoming. I think Third Reformed down the street has just been wonderful to us. They have let us use their church beyond the call of duty. They have really reached out to us during this fire. Also Hope Church and the College.

KVW: When was the fire?

SMTH: December the twelfth last year. Next week will be a year.

KVW: Do have anything more to say about that with how it's changed just the members of the congregation in the fire? How it has impacted.

SMTH: Well, it's impacted them. I don't think they'll ever be the same, because it was such a great loss to them. Now we're like dispersed. We're like sojourners, going from church to church, and some people could accept it a little better than the older people, people that are not well, they mind moving from place to place. We're all working together to get the church built. It has effected... people are still grieving, because you never realize the people love the church... it could be this church or Third Reformed or anyone... that can loose the church, the place of worship, they grieve over that. It's very important to people. For me to come here at this time, it's very difficult, because for me to lead people -- they're all spread apart, it's not easy. I have to be patient. My getting to know people is slow.

KVW: This is your first Holland winter.

SMTH: You have to remember I come from Pennsylvania, and last year the snow was way up to past the doors of the church. I lived across the street from this church, and I lived in the mountainous, the Pocanno mountains. It's a ski resort. It's not new to me. If I came from Florida or the south or... but I come from a mountainous place. But it seems to me that the winters come earlier here than in most places in the east.

KVW: What have you enjoyed about being here?

SMTH: Oh, being so close to Lake Michigan, and Lake Macatawa. I love to go and sit by the water. That was a dream come true. I'm ten minutes away, just on the north side, just go down James or Lakewood. Drive down to the State

Park or to Tunnel Park, and just sit and watch the lake. It looks like the ocean--Lake Michigan, it's so large. Just to sit there and look out at the water. I love it.

KVW: Have you ever gone in the water?

SMTH: I was about three hours away from the New Jersey shores.

KVW: Have you gone on Lake Michigan, like in a boat?

SMTH: Oh, no. I came in the end of August I didn't know anybody. I just would go down to the water.

KVW: In the hospital so far, what type of people have you worked with the most, like women, men, elderly?

SMTH: Variety. It depends whose sick in the hospital. There's a variety men, women, young, old. In fact, my first person that I met at the end of August when I came here, on the night when he was discharged, he came back again and I visited him in his home, and he just died last week. I conducted the service at the funeral home. Did I write on that paper you gave me. Did you ask about education? The different places I've studied.

KVW: No, are you involved in the education in the church here?

SMTH: Not at the present. Oh, let me see. Yes, I am. I have a group of women that come to my apartment, and we are reading a book and we're discussing it. It's very wonderful because they share deeply where they're at in their journey. So do I. In fact, this Wednesday is the last time we meet this year. We did it for eight weeks, we studied.

KVW: And these are women in the church?

SMTH: Yes. We would have liked to have some men, but the women showed up.

Definitely. Women, I think, in all churches, are the ones that are the most active. When it comes to Bible studies, or any kind of studies. More women show up at churches than men.

KVW: Do you have any reasoning for that?

SMTH: Well, I think they have never let go of the fact that they feel that women's place is the home. For spirituality, men feel that they have their whole life figured out with the Lord, too, I guess. I don't know, but I think it goes back to that macho culture. Latin America, where they felt that the church was for the women, the men stayed home. It kind of seeped into our culture. I must say that there is an improvement. Men are searching, too, in their journey.

KVW: You said earlier that you thought the church is different especially with. . .

SMTH: There's an openness for women in working, doing more with the ministry in the church. Doing their ministry in the church.

KVW: Did you grow-up in the Catholic church?

SMTH: Yes.

KVW: Is there anything that sticks out in your mind about Holland?

SMTH: You asked me the most important question. I think towards the end there you asked me what do I like most about Holland, and I'm telling you the water and the scenic beauty. That is like a dream of mine come true. I've always wanted to be near water. I love just to sit by the water. I think it's so

peaceful, and it's wonderful. I don't think that people here have grown accustomed to just having these lakes here, because no matter when you go in the winter there's always people walking there. Or before it got very, very cold, even till the last couple weeks, I went down in the afternoon on my day off, and there would be families there. I'm happy the people never take it for granted, because it's a wonderful thing to have here. I love to ride down Lakeshore road, too, and Macatawa down that area -- Southshore drive right near here.

KVW: Do you usually go on your days off?

SMTH: Yes. I at least try to spend some time down there.

KVW: Who else do you work with at the church like who is on your staff?

SMTH: Well, we have a large staff, but my main one that I'm responsible to is Father Steve, the pastor, and I work with Father Jose, too. But, mainly I work with him. But you see, we work together, but there are people that work in their field. Like there's a group that does the faith formation, so all their outreach goes together. The sister that's next to me does outreach, and she works with people that need a lot of help that need food, clothing, shelter, and all that. Or we refer people, like if I come across somebody that needs help, then I refer them to her, or if she sees someone in the hospital, then she refers them to me. We work as a team, but yet we're a separate pair. Naturally, the ones that pertain to the type of work your doing, you work with them.

KVW: Do you know how many are on staff here in all?



SMTH: There are about ten of us, and then there are people that have offices here that pertain to other departments that work here. Like Eric, I forget Eric's last name, who does the AID's ministry. His office is down here. He works for all the churches.

KVW: Eric Grey.

SMTH: Yes.

KVW: Are there two fathers?

SMTH: Yes.

KVW: I don't know personally. What is the difference between the fathers and the sisters in the church?

SMTH: O.K. It's like, you have a minister in your church -- right a minister. Then, he's in charge of all the pastoral work, but then you might have a women minister working with him. I don't know how equal they are in your churches, but in ours they are specially ordained. They have, I can't explain it to you if your not Catholic, I don't know how to explain it to you. But, they have a special role. The women in the church, in the Catholic church, are working toward ordination. If we were to be ordained, it's like they have them in the Episcopal churches, Lutheran churches where they have women priests. There would be equality, but up to that point they have a special role there. As male people in the church, the authority feels that only they were called to that special part, because Jesus was a man and all his followers that were the closest to him were men. That's the philosophy.

KVW: Which sisters or fathers have you gotten to know the best, or have you?

SMTH: In this short time, I've gotten to know them all. Especially the sisters because they live right near me. In the complex that I live, one lives right across the hall. She has her apartment. The other one is in the other complex. We're all very close. We're kind of good friends. The priests as well. They're very nice to work with and all that. But again, it depends on the person, like I'm not the kind of person who says like, I have this great friendship with people when I'm just new. You need to develop a relationship with people as you work with them, and also socialized with them and so on.

KVW: Is there a big age difference or are you about the same age?

SMTH: Yes. But the menn no. Because Father Jose, he's very young. He's in his twenties. He was just made a priest. Then the one that's in charge, he's only forty. He's a young man, too. For all this responsibility, yes, he's very young.

KVW: How is the school involved in the church?

SMTH: Well, most Catholic churches, years ago, when they started in the United States. The Catholic church started in the seventeen hundreds when they began to develop. Always, because there were a lot of poor people, they would build a school for the children to have a place to go to school to learn. They were always around a Catholic church, it's very rarely you don't see a school connected to it. That's part of educating the children. It's like you have the Christian schools. You have some of the churches here, the

denominations are connected with the school for the children too. A Christian school because they feel that they want them not only to get their secular subjects, but also to have some religious training and to teach them values. That's always usually part of it, the school is very much connected to us.

KVW: Do you ever work in the school?

SMTH: Not here. Now most of the sisters are not working at schools. We used to years ago.

KVW: Who teaches in these schools?

SMTH: Teachers, lay people. The principal also is a very fine principal. He's been one for a good many years. But the reason a lot of us have given up teaching is because we feel that right in front of us there's so many needs open. Like to the Spanish community where we were trained, and we have the language, so why wouldn't we help an outreach to the Spanish? Or we have a lot of sisters working with AIDs patients. Wherever there's a need, that's what we should be about. We have spread out to different kind of ministries. We have sister that are lawyers, doctors, social workers, a lot of social workers. Where we're needed most, that's where we try to go.

KVW: Have you ever noticed a generation gap between ages in Holland?

SMTH: I couldn't answer that question, because I haven't been here long enough.

KVW: How have you perceived Hope college since you've been here?

SMTH: Well, I think that that's another plus for Holland to have a college community. Because, usually the people that are working on the staff of the college, they

bring a lot to the community. Also, the students... There's also a better library and there are a lot more cultural events. For example in this a small town, you have a theater for foreign films. You have a lot of cultural activities that you wouldn't have. I don't know. I know some of the staff. I know Maura Reynolds that is a professor at the college and her husband. This is their church. I met a couple other teachers at the college, they come to our monthly meetings of pastoral staff. They're fine people, and all that adds to the community. Just even the other library that is the public library, I find that there are better materials in there because of the community.

KVW: Have you seen any main controversies in Holland that you've been interested in?

SMTH: Well, I think I mentioned like the homelessness, the Evergreen... I'd like to know why don't the people feel at home there? Why couldn't they have some things there for other cultures?

KVW: Has there been any main turning point in your life?

SMTH: Lot's of them. Lot's of them. I think one of them was after being in Peru, and I came home, I had a turning point in what kind of work I was going to do. Whether I would go on working with the Spanish... But I had just finished completing a study in Peru in spirituality, and I was interested in doing that kind of work. I called up a pastor where I had lived in his locality, and was in that parish and experienced wonderful, wonderful warm people. I thought that would be a good place to start a center for the people. A spiritual

center where they would learn the Bible. Where I could bring in wonderful speakers to help them on their journey to God. I had a lot of training. When I called him he was very open, and he thought that the people there were ready for something like that. Without knowing what it was going to turn out to be he just said, do it. He gave me a place where I could work, and then I had to explore and meet all kinds of people. By the time I left, we would have fifty and sixty people coming to lectures, and to Bible studies, and different things of that nature. That was a turning point and a challenge. I thought that my volunteering to go to Poland would have been another great thing, and it was for the summer. But it didn't turn out to be a program for a couple years. I always feel that nothing happens by chance. I feel that everything that happens in your life, there's a purpose. Yes, and I feel that everything is for a reason. (tape ends) Then I worked in the archives, I realized that I like working with people better, I learned a lot by working there. Archives contain a lot of history, and I learned a lot of history about my community. It was, from going all the way back to the beginning. It was great to learn of women who did such noble things, well, gosh, it was so much more difficult in the past. My next turning point was to come here. People couldn't believe I would choose coming to Holland, Michigan. Where was Holland? What part of Michigan was it in? What's so great that I want to go there so far? I'm very far away from my sisters, my family. They couldn't understand that. I believe that there's a purpose for my being here,

and it's another turning point. Any time I do something like that, I discover wonderful things. Wonderful things happen. But, I believe that... I just don't believe that I'm here for a couple years, and then I'll move on somewhere else. No, there's something here for me to do.

KVW: Great, thank you for your time.

SMTH: Your welcome.